

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?**JOB 33:13-14, et al**

On one of his ski trips, Steve Winger saw to his surprise a blind person skiing. The blind skier, wearing a bright pink vest, stayed directly behind an instructor, listening for directions on how and when to turn. Over the next several days Steve saw many blind skiers on the slopes. They had one thing in common. All of them were listening carefully to the person who gave them the information they needed to make it safely down the mountain. Knowing God's will is all about listening to God speak.

Today we continue in a series of messages we started two weeks ago. *Knowing God's Will: Is It Like Using A GPS Or A Compass?* As we journey through life, does God offer us explicit directions like a global positioning system, a GPS? Turn right. Bear left. Recalculating. Turn now. I wish He did, but that's not been my experience. It's been more like a compass. God provides a general direction – like a compass – and expects me to trust Him and obey Him as I move forward. Followers of Jesus can be both intrigued and frustrated by discerning God's will for our own lives, and so we want to see what God's Word says about the subject and reflect on it together. In that first message we asked and answered two questions: what is God's will and how can we know it? Today I'd like to answer another question. How does God speak?

We'll look at several different Bible verses today, but let's start with a couple in the Old Testament book of Job. It's implied there we can get frustrated with God because He often seems to be silent when we're trying to communicate with Him. But we're reminded that God does indeed speak. He does communicate. We're also reminded that God's ways of speaking and communicating with us are many and varied. God isn't limited to just one or two ways of interacting with human beings and getting His message through. Therefore, we should assume it will take some time and some learning on our part to perceive the different ways God speaks and how to hear Him.

Today let's consider four ways God speaks to you and me. Certainly there are many more than four. For example, God can speak to us through the beauties of nature, through dreams, through great music or literature, through meaningful conversations with family and friends, and through random circumstances that come into our lives. Why, there's even a story in the Old Testament of how God opened the mouth of a donkey and spoke through it to a man named Balaam! How's that for novelty? God can use any method to communicate to anybody at anytime about anything. Nevertheless, I believe Scripture reveals that God most often speak through four methods or means. If we truly want to know and do God's will, we should be aware of these four and how they function. So, let's get started! First,...

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH THE BIBLE.

I'm sure that didn't surprise you, did it? Very clearly, the Word of God, the Bible, is God's most comprehensive revelation of His will to you and me. This is what the Bible says about itself. "Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path." (Ps 119:105 NLT). It also says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us

what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17 NLT)

If you're truly interested in what the God of the universe has to say to you, I suggest you maintain some key attitudes towards the Bible at all times. First, use it regularly. Establish a regular time to read and reflect on God's Word. It might be daily or several times a week, but it needs to be a regular and faithful part of your life's routine. If you're not reading the Bible regularly, you're missing out on God's number one way to talk to you. Second, use the Bible intelligently. Any fool can prove anything from the Bible. All you have to do is rip verses out of their context - their intended meaning - and you can come up with the strangest beliefs imaginable. Or you can be ignorant of how the Bible applies to you and your life situations. Perhaps you've heard of the severely depressed man who was looking through the Bible for direction. He'd heard about the "put your finger on a random verse method" and thought it was worth a try. He let the Bible fall open by itself and he put his finger on this verse, "Then Judas threw the silver coins down in the Temple and went out and hanged himself." (Matt 27:5 NLT) That certainly wasn't what he wanted to hear! But he tried the random approach again. This time his finger fell on the verse, "Then Jesus said, 'Yes, now go and do the same.'" (Luke 10:37 NLT) Now, he was really beginning to wonder! Was God speaking to him? Out of desperation, he tried the "put your finger on a random verse" method one more time. He ended up with this one, "Then Jesus told him, 'Hurry and do what you're going to do.'" (John 13:27 NLT) Many people do little more than adopt the magical "put your finger on a verse" method and imagine God is going to speak to them that way.

Third, use the Bible humbly. Yes, the Bible can be intimidating. It's a big, long book as books go. How many other books have a number in front of every sentence? That's kind of strange! If you have an old translation, you run into lots of thee's and thou's. And even if you read the most modern translation out there, you encounter strange places, unpronounceable names, and very different words and customs. It's easy to throw up your hands and say, "I give up!" I encourage you to persevere humbly and diligently. The Bible is like the owner's manual for a new car. If you read the owner's manual and do what it says, your car will probably last a lot longer. The Bible is God's manual for life and living. Be patient with yourself. Getting to know it well will take time. But the more you understand it, the more opportunity you will have to obey it and the more success you will have in knowing God and His will.

Fourth, use the Bible corporately. Nobody could be a bigger advocate of personal Bible study than me. But reading and studying God's Word on your own is no substitute for studying it along with other Christians. Join a church school class or a small group. Join one of our discipleship triads when you're invited. Some new ones are going to get launched in the next few months. The S letter in our ROPES acrostic which describes the KRBC picture of a disciple stands for Scripture. Following Jesus well entails studying the Bible in relationship with other followers of Jesus. It's also important to hear pastors explain the Bible to you as well as other gifted teachers and preachers in person and online. When it comes to studying God's Word it should never be a

decision between personal or corporate study. Both are very important and help us get the best understanding of the Bible possible.

Did you know the Bible will not speak to you about everything? For instance, it will not predict your future specifically. True, the Bible reveals general truths about your destiny. For example, if you've put your trust in Jesus, you have received the gift of eternal life. But the Bible's not a divine horoscope that can be used to figure out specific details about your life next month or two years from now. Then, again, the Bible will not answer all your questions. Many of the "why" questions we ask about our lives won't get answered this side of Heaven. Why did my spouse leave me? Why did my child die? Why did I lose my job? Why do I have an incurable disease? We read from the book of Job a few minutes ago. Here was a man who lost everything – his children, his possessions, his health. Naturally, Job wanted an answer. But the only answer God gave him can be summed up like this, "Job, since I'm God and you're a mere human being, there's no way you can understand all that I do and why I do. Trust Me. I know what I'm doing." The Bible will also not provide specific direction for every decision. It will not tell you the name of the person you should marry or what career to pursue. It will not tell you what church to join or what ministry to get involved in. It will not tell you which lost person specifically you should reach out to. If you assume the Bible will provide you with information in any of those three ways, you'll be disappointed.

So, how does God speak to you and me through the Bible? The Bible will confirm God's sovereignty. As you read it receptively, it will remind you God is there, God loves you, and God has a plan and purpose for your life. When you're trying to make your way through the fog of pain or disappointment in life, the Bible will lift your thinking above the fog and reveal a loving God who's in control at all times. Another way the Bible will speak to you is by convicting you of sin. The Bible is alive and God will use it to point out attitudes or actions we need to change. Even though it was written thousands of years ago, when you read Scripture with an open, receptive heart the Holy Spirit will make it's principles and truth come alive for you. In fact, here's what the Bible says about itself, "For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires." (Heb 4:12 NLT)

Something else. The Bible communicates God's purpose for you. It gives us very specific guidance in many areas – don't steal, don't tell lies, be sexually pure, pray continually, worship regularly, love and reach out to lost people – just to give a few examples. It also provides many other precepts or principles that can then be applied to a wide range of situations that each of us face in life and living. Page after page in many different and diverse ways, the Bible reinforces God's primary purpose for your life and mine – to mold us into the image of His Son, Jesus. He wants you to love what Jesus loves, to think like Jesus thinks, and to act like Jesus acts in every situation.

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH LEADINGS.

What's a "leading"? A leading is an impression God the Holy Spirit makes on your mind to do something specific in obedience to His will. There are many examples of leadings in the Bible. Nehemiah, a high-ranking Jewish official in the Persian Empire, gave up his privileged position in order to rebuild the broken down walls of Jerusalem. How did Nehemiah figure out this was what God wanted him to do? He said, "I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem." (Neh 2:12 NLT) It was a leading, an impression made upon Nehemiah's mind through the Holy Spirit. The great missionary leader, Paul, and his associate, Silas, were prevented from continuing their missionary activities in what's now the country of Turkey and instead were led to do evangelism in what's now Greece. We read, "The Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there." (Acts 16:7 NLT) It was a leading, a strong impression made upon their minds through the Holy Spirit.

Does God still speak to us through leadings today? Absolutely! Now, there's no biblical definition of a leading although you can read about being led by the Holy Spirit. We do have, however, several Bible passages promising God will lead us. For instance, "The Lord says, 'I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you.'" (Ps 32:8 NLT) Or how about, "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking." (Jam 1:5 NLT)

How do leadings of the Holy Spirit happen? Obviously, God can strongly impress us to do something at any time, but more often than, they come as the result of patient, prayerful stillness before God. The Bible does say, "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Ps 46:10 NLT) Stillness before God invites Him to speak into your heart and mind. Jesus made it a regular habit to get up early and spend quiet, still moments in prayer to His Father. Out of that prayerful stillness, the Holy Spirit directed Jesus' ministry. He impressed upon Jesus' mind what He should do and say each and every day.

What does prayerful stillness look like? Well, you find a quiet place alone, you focus your mind on Jesus, you close your mouth, you consciously open your spirit to the Holy Spirit, and you invite Him to speak into your life. What are the kinds of things He might say to you? If you're interested in Jesus, but you've never actually committed your life to Him personally, He might say, "It's time to surrender your life to Me. It's time to turn away from your independence, your sins, and become My follower." If you've become kind of spiritually cold, He might say, "Where have you been? I haven't gone anywhere. Let's get reacquainted." If there's a sin that needs to be confessed or a relationship you need to mend, He might say, "This has got to stop. This attitude or that behavior needs to be surrendered to me. Here's how you can get this broken relationship fixed." If you're facing very difficult problems or heartaches, He might say, "I'm right here and I'll never leave or forsake you. My grace is sufficient for you. I love you and I will use this in good ways you can't imagine right now." If you're wondering how you can serve Jesus, He might say, "I've called and equipped you to do this ministry. Take a risk. I'm with you and I won't let you fail." God will not have something to say to you directly every time you meet with Him. He speaks when He has something to say. But He does tend to speak into our lives more often when we invite Him to speak.

Can seeking God's will through His leadings be abused? Sure. If God can make impressions on your mind, so can the devil. In fact, the word for the devil's brand of leadings is temptation! Given the fact the Bible says the devil masquerades as an angel of light, how can we be sure we're not getting bamboozled by our great spiritual enemy? Well, true leadings are always consistent with Scripture. The Holy Spirit will never lead you to marry a non-Christian, or tell a lie, or treat someone with disrespect. If an impression goes against the Bible's teaching, it comes from an unholy spirit not the Holy Spirit. Reject it immediately. Then, true leadings are consistent with the person God created you to be. God has made each of us with unique talents, gifts, abilities, likes and dislikes. God will never ask you to do something you're just not equipped to do or be involved in a ministry for which you are not spiritually gifted. True leadings are often confirmed by circumstances. In other words, God often opens and closes doors of opportunity to us. If an impression is accompanied by an open door, that's one more reason to conclude it's a genuine leading from the Holy Spirit. I agree with the observation that when God opens a door, no one can close it and when He closes a door, no one can open it. Circumstances can confirm leadings.

True leadings of the Holy Spirit are accompanied by His peace. I've found if I'm in danger of stepping out of God's will for my life, the Holy Spirit will often put me on edge. There's just kind of a restless, jangling in my spirit that indicates I'm not in tune with Him. By the same token, if my decision is accompanied by an overwhelming sense of His peace, it raises my confidence level I'm being truly led by the Lord. True leadings usually involve being a servant. If an impression to do something is self-serving or self-promoting, be suspicious of it. Genuine leadings of the Holy Spirit often encourage me to humble myself, serve somebody, encourage someone, or give something away. The devil will never do that! I think of something Paul said, "And now I am bound by the Spirit (that was a leading) to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead." (Acts 20:22-23 NLT) Paul knew he was being led to sacrifice his personal safety and comfort for the sake of spreading the good news about Jesus. Some of God's leadings will require us to make a choice between staying comfortable or being useful in His Kingdom, making money or seeking first His Kingdom, being a winner in the world's eyes or being prosperous and successful in His eyes. Here's a third way God might speak to us.

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH WISE COUNSELORS.

Godly people who can give us wise counsel are one of God's great gifts to us. The Bible tells us to seek out these people and listen carefully to what they say. "Pride leads to conflict; those who take advice are wise." (Pro 13:10 NLT) It also says, "Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many advisers bring success." (Pro 15:22 NLT) Wise counselors give you insight concerning your problems. I think of Moses trying to administrate everything for everybody among the two million Israelites he led out of Egypt. His father in law, Jethro, outlined a wise plan to relieve Moses of unnecessary stress and Moses was humble enough to listen and do it.

Wise counselors can give you insight into how best to serve the Lord. If someone approaches you to begin a new ministry or get involved in an existing ministry, a godly counselor can often give you good advice on what to do if you're uncertain. They might have a better grasp on your gifts and abilities than even you do; therefore, they can encourage you do what's best. Wise counselors can help you correct sinful behavior and attitudes. Do you have someone like that in your life who loves you enough to warn you when you're heading in the wrong direction? Wise counselors are godly people who only want for you what God wants for you. No agenda. They stay objective, listen carefully, and answer slowly. Here's the fourth way God might speak to us.

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH PAIN.

Perhaps it's a bit odd to make this one of the big four ways God speaks to us, but both the Bible and life experience confirms it. Physical pain, financial pain, relational pain, emotional pain, circumstantial pain can be a way God speaks. I don't like pain any more than anyone else, but I've got to admit it's been a primary way God has spoken to me in my life. I see that pattern in the lives of Bible characters and other followers of Jesus, too. Maybe it's because so much of what God wants to do in us requires change of some kind: a change in our attitudes, a change in our behavior, a change in our priorities, a change in how we do relationships. None of us like change. We often fear what it will require of us. Often we will not change until the pain becomes greater than the fear of change. Once the pain gets greater than the fear, then we change.

The psalmist said to God, "I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.... Your instructions are more valuable to me than millions in gold and silver." (Ps 119:67, 72 NLT) One of the great discoveries in knowing God and His will is when we stop resisting pain, rejecting pain, being mad at pain, and begin to open ourselves to whatever God might want to say to us through the pain we experience. C.S. Lewis had a great insight when he wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures,... but shouts in our pains." If you're in pain today about some matter, it's probably not because God is displeased with you. Instead, God wants to speak to you. He wants to get your attention. He has something important to say and to do in you.

Years ago, farmers in southern Alabama were accustomed to planting one crop every year--cotton. They would plow as much ground as they could and plant their crop. Year after year they lived by cotton. Then one year the dreaded boll weevil devastated the whole area. So the next year the farmers mortgaged their homes and planted cotton again, hoping for a good harvest. But as the cotton began to grow, the insect came back and destroyed the crop, wiping out most of the farms. The few who survived those two years of the boll weevil decided to experiment the third year, so they planted something they'd never planted before--peanuts. And peanuts proved so hardy and the market proved so ravenous for that product that the farmers who survived the first two years reaped profits that third year that enabled them to pay off all their debts. They planted peanuts from then on and prospered greatly. Do you know what those farmers did? They spent some of their new wealth to erect in the town square a monument--to the boll weevil. I kid you not! If you go to the town of Enterprise, Alabama, you will see

a monument built to the boll weevil. Why? If it hadn't been for the boll weevil, they never would have discovered peanuts. They learned that even out of disaster can come great delight, out of pain can come unexpected blessing.

So you want to know God and His will? God does speak to us. Whether it's the Bible itself, leadings of the Holy Spirit, wise counselors, or even in or through the experience of pain, God is speaking. Learn how to listen. Learn how to listen well.